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Next: Reflection on Furman going forward

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President Plyler with sons John (left) and Jim on Father's Day, 1938.

“I BELIEVE HE SAW FURMAN AS IT IS TODAY, AND HE'D BE QUITE PLEASED WITH THE UNIVERSITY'S DIRECTION.”

to none in beauty. And he especially knew the importance of a strong faculty, that the faculty makes the school. I believe he saw Furman as it is today, and he'd be quite pleased with the university's direction. Elizabeth Davis is a wonderful leader. She began her presidency listening to others, then evaluating what could be done in a visionary way, very much like my father.

Speaking of Dr. Davis, how can alumni contribute to the success of her signature program, The Furman Advantage, with its emphasis on transformative education and lifetime connections?

JP: A few years ago, I was talking with a graduate who told me how she had continued to maintain a relationship with a professor. This professor was still mentoring the young lady years after she graduated. I thought it was remarkable. So I went to the professor and thanked her as an alumnus for having such a life-changing influence on students.

Alumni can fill the same kind of role, but we have to be willing to listen to students and understand what their goals are, what experiences they've had and where they're coming from. We can use that knowledge to help guide them or suggest new or different ways of thinking. It's important for us to listen, though, and not simply direct; it can't be a one-way thing. If we do it right, Furman is going to be something else. ●



NEXT

Reflection on Furman going forward

“Have you heard of The Furman Advantage?” So quipped President Elizabeth Davis at Furman's September 2017 Opening Convocation. After the collective sighs, eye rolls and eventual laughter subsided, I was struck by a poignant moment of self-reflection: For the first time since I arrived at Furman seven years earlier, I was not adjusting to new classes, learning the names of my students, nor sharing the academic calendar's peculiar ebbs and flows as a teaching professor. Having assumed my role as The Furman Advantage coordinator on July 1, I officially had, as multiple faculty colleagues teased, “gone over to the dark side” (aka the administration).

Cue the questions. What do I see in The Furman Advantage that makes it more than just another vision statement? How have I been persuaded to leave the classroom space I relish for its dynamic interchange of ideas? What has convinced me to shift away from daily interactions with energetic undergraduates and to embrace an entirely new position?

The Furman Advantage is unified, coherent and transformative. It not only builds upon Furman's historic strengths – such as outstanding instruction and an abiding commitment to engaged learning – but also facilitates students' guided discovery, exploration and pursuit of individualized pathways through both conversations with mentors and their own self-reflection. The Furman Advantage approaches education holistically, recognizing, for example, that leadership

experiences outside the classroom often prove as influential in determining career trajectories.

Simultaneously with the implementation of The Furman Advantage, Furman has undertaken a robust assessment plan both internally and externally through its Gallup partnership. An immediate challenge with instituting new programs – whether inclusive pedagogy workshops, the Pathways initiative or the Malone Center's Paladin Career Treks – involves discerning where we are succeeding and where we must make adjustments. Indeed, the Quality Enhancement Plan, submitted as part of Furman's re-accreditation process, guarantees every student, sometime during his or her four years, one high-impact, engaged-learning experience, studying away, participating in undergraduate research or completing an internship.

Far more significant than reaching this 100 percent participation benchmark (and far more difficult, quite frankly) is ensuring the quality of such experiences – the very quality that distinguishes a Furman liberal arts and sciences education. Therein is the boldness of The Furman Advantage – its ambitious audacity. Therein lies the promise of what is next.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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